

CIA Censorship, Like Its Management, Is Out of Control

By Ilana Sara Greenstein

I served as a Central Intelligence Agency operations officer in Iraq from 2004 to 2005. What I witnessed there was nothing short of disastrous—operationally and ethically. I raised my concerns repeatedly through my chain of command to no avail. When I got back to Langley, I wrote a memo to CIA Director General Michael Hayden outlining some of the problems I saw. He took no effective action in response. Around the same time, the managers about whose behavior I had raised concerns tried to block my next assignment.

Despite my failure to effect change internally, not once did I speak to a journalist, member of Congress, or any other unauthorized person. (Note to readers: At the CIA, members of Congress are generally considered “unauthorized” persons). I believed in Hayden’s stated philosophy that employees should have available—and utilize—internal recourses before resorting to outside remedies.

Unfortunately, all inside solutions failed. Now, several years and a resignation later, having futilely exhausted all internal avenues for reform, I am attempting to write a book about the CIA in Iraq. But now I’m faced with yet another challenge to airing the Agency’s wrongdoing: the CIA’s Publications Review Board (PRB), a panel to which all current and former employees must submit their Agency-related writing for classification review.

Seven months after I submitted the first 50 pages of my book, the PRB returned my manuscript with its redactions. (Note to readers: the statutory period of review for the PRB is 30 days). In addition to focusing its deletions on the most damning portions of my writing, the Agency censored my height and weight (available on my driver’s license or by looking at me), the fact that there are no Starbucks shops in Baghdad, and the number of hours a day Iraqis had running water and electricity. The PRB also removed entire footnotes containing unclassified URLs I had used to document my writing, as well as information Hayden himself had used in speeches—that are posted on the CIA’s website.

Based on its own policy (and—lest we forget—the Constitution), the PRB is only permitted to redact sources and methods that damage national security. But even the most doubtful reader would surely contest that any of the above examples touches on national security. Moreover, the Agency has permitted numerous books—and sometimes even made its own revelations—about sources and methods in other countries, such as Afghanistan, where the Agency looked good and proved reasonably successful. In fact, the PRB has shown itself to be generous and liberal when it comes to laudatory authors or senior managers such as former DCI George Tenet.

So why the undue scrutiny surrounding my book and Iraq? I can think of only two reasons—if the censors don’t classify my revelations. (Needless to say, I had to have this article approved as well.)

First: Iraq is the country in which the CIA has most glaringly failed. And the second: me. I was a vocal dissenter at the CIA; I raised my concerns openly and unabashedly.

Unfortunately, given the CIA’s complete discretion in determining what is classified, vocal dissenters and critics are often underhandedly punished for their beliefs via the publication review process. And too often, the CIA hides under its cloak of national security in justifying potential wrongdoing.

Here’s another example on a larger scale of the arbitrary nature of the PRB’s redactions. Recently, the media revealed the TSA’s failure to implement liquid explosive screening technology in airports. The revelations play out like a terrorist blueprint. However, the article was

not based on classified information. Nonsensically, the TSA is allowed to divulge information that literally allows terrorists to plan attacks, while I—and other critical authors—are not allowed to discuss the CIA's flaws in an effort to suggest reform.

If the PRB's disparate treatment of critical authors is still not apparent, let me share one last anecdote. Recently, I talked to attorney Janine Brookner, expelled from the CIA years ago based on unfounded allegations of being a "sexual provocateur." One of the many battles she faces in her life work of holding the CIA accountable is overcoming the agency's heavy-handed censorship. Recently, she was flabbergasted to find the CIA had tried to redact the exact same verbiage in her legal brief it had openly used in its own brief.

So I have two small solutions. First, the President should appoint an independent head of the CIA's PRB. With the right to determine what is classified comes the responsibility to judge fairly. Indeed, under the current process, the PRB often farms out submissions for classification review to the very individuals about whom authors (often critically) write. We should no longer allow a questionable organization to be its own judge, particularly -- particularly -- when it has the authority to infringe on what is arguably our most cherished constitutional right: freedom of speech.

Second, the PRB should implement a blanket policy of allowing authors to publish any information already in the media (assuming the authors, themselves, did not initially reveal the information to the media without prior approval). Currently, the PRB enforces the twisted policy of redacting information already in the public domain. Indeed, in the manuscript I submitted, the PRB refused to allow me in even one instance to restate information I carefully documented from open sources.

The PRB claims that it "considers" open sources, but that such sources are not definitive. In practice, this means open sources are irrelevant; censors can continue to justify even the most arbitrary redactions.

Further, the PRB argues that, if it were to allow former CIA employees to restate public information, this would be tantamount to acknowledging the information or verifying its truth. In fact, this argument goes against even the CIA's own stated policy.

According to its guidelines, the PRB does not claim responsibility for any author's opinions, information, or veracity: the PRB even requires authors to stamp a standard disclaimer with words to this effect inside the front cover of every approved book. So the Agency should not be concerned with how "true" an author appears.

Indeed, the negative implication of the PRB's argument is that every book it does approve has the CIA's stamp of approval: that the CIA agrees with everything in every book it has ever approved. Surely the Agency doesn't want to send this message. It's an argument that will ultimately backfire.

The PRB appears confused. Its role is not to base decisions on the credibility of the author or the seeming veracity of the published material. Its role is simple: to redact information damaging to national security. Once the information is in the public sector, it can't be "re-compromised." It's out there. The Agency might not like it. But it can't respond by denying authors their constitutional rights.

I do not expect the CIA to reform in a day. The problems I have witnessed will take years, if not decades, to undo. I do, however, expect the reasonable opportunity to discuss reform. Without it, we are no better than our enemies. And without it, we will lose to our enemies.

I would love to discuss the problems I've seen over the last several years. But without the ability to tell you even the number of hours a day Iraqis have electricity, criticism with any substance is impossible.

The nation may never know the truth.

Ilana Sara Greenstein served as a CIA operations officer from 2002 through 2008, during which she won six exceptional performance awards. In Baghdad in 2005 the military cited her for exceptional intelligence support for work that "directly saved lives" - the only staff employee within CIA to receive such an award. Prior to joining the CIA she worked with the U.S. Department of Defense in Bosnia and England.